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THE WASHINGTON POST
27 January 1981

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Korea Quandary: North Has Advantage

In less than a week, South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan will pay a visit to the White House, and there is a compelling reason why he will be among the first foreign leaders to see President Reagan.

But highly classified intelligence reports indicate that the ideologically divided peninsula — scene of the first armed confrontation in the East-West conflict after World War II — may become the next tinderbox with which the United States will have to contend.

The consensus of our experts in the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency is that North Korea could roll right over its neighbor to the south — unless there is heavy U.S. assistance to South Korea.

As intelligence sources explained it to my associate Dale Van Atta, it's a matter of cold military hardware:

- "By almost every measurement, North Korea exceeds South Korea in both quantity and quality of tanks," warns a secret CIA appraisal. "The north has a 2.5-to-1 numerical lead over the south in medium tanks and, within this category, a better than 3-to-1 advantage in numbers of first-line, high-quality tanks."

- The two Koreas are approximately equal in ground troops: 520,000 in the south, 600,000 in the north. But a

top-secret Pentagon report concludes that "without U.S. combat and logistics support . . . [South Korean] ground forces would probably not be capable of successfully defending Seoul against a surprise North Korean attack."

- In the air, the disparity is much worse. South Korea has a 33,000-man air force with 424 combat aircraft. North Korea has a 51,000-man air force with 724 aircraft. "Without substantial augmentation, the [South Koreans] would be hard pressed to repel a sizable North Korean air attack," the Pentagon report declares. A small crumb of comfort is added with the estimate that the North Koreans would be "capable of performing a primary mission of air defense and limited offensive operations" on their own, but would need "outside assistance" to conduct sustained operations.

- North Korea's navy is "markedly superior" to South Korea's in number of combat personnel, materiel readiness and firepower. It has 31,000 marines to South Korea's 22,000.

All things considered, the Pentagon experts conclude that "North Korea has the ability to launch and support a surprise attack against the Republic of Korea."

What's more, intelligence sources offer the ominous prediction that, de-

spite infusions of aid from the United States, South Korea will be militarily inferior to North Korea for at least three years.

Two things have made the simmering situation in Korea capable of boiling over at any minute.

One was the possibility that South Korean dissident Kim Dae Jung would be executed by the military regime. His sentence was commuted by the South Korean president to life imprisonment, after the country's Supreme Court rejected an appeal against a military tribunal's death sentence.

The other danger is that the transfer of American aircraft carriers and other components from the Pacific to the Persian Gulf might also tempt the North Koreans to launch a sneak attack on South Korea.